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THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE CATHOLIC LAYMAN.

SIR—In a letter, which within this month has been taking the round of the Protestant papers, from the pen of the well-known Protestant writer, Dr. Croly, I find the following passage:—

"The Popish hierarchy having been summoned by the Pope from various countries of Europe and, amongst others, from our own, and the meeting having commenced its sittings in Rome, on the 22nd of last month, I must make some remarks on the subject. The declared purpose is the promulgation of the doctrine, that the mother of our Lord was born exempt from original sin, as the doctrine of the Christian world. That other purposes are concealed under this summons, we can scarcely have a doubt; for the doctrine, under the name of the 'Immaculate Conception,' was established by the formulary of the Council of Trent three centuries ago, in these words—'The blessed Mary, Mother of God, is exempt from all sin, actual and original.'—Session 6."

Now, sir, I would be glad to know how does that statement, from so high a Protestant authority, comport with your oft-repeated assertion, that the doctrine has been heretofore an open question in the Catholic Church, never decided or settled by Pope or council—and the more especially with the statement in your last number, that "the Council of Trent expressly declared, that they did not decide on this doctrine?" An answer in your next, to this humble inquiry, will much oblige your most humble servant, St. Stephens's Day, 1854.

A CATHOLIC.

We think it not likely that Dr. Croly should have made such a statement, and we decline to search "the round of the papers" for it, for this reason—we have made it our rule never to produce the assertions of Protestants as proofs of the doctrines of the Church of Rome; we charge nothing on the Church of Rome but what we find in her own standard authorities, or in the writings of her Popes, cardinals, bishops, &c. We feel sure that Roman Catholics approve of our never bringing Protestant writers as evidence of what is believed in the Church of Rome. What the Council of Trent did must be decided by the records of that Council, and not by what Dr. Croly or any other Protestant may have said.

In the sixth session of the Council of Trent, there is nothing at all on the subject of the conception of the Blessed Virgin, nor of original sin in respect of her; but in the fifth session, which declares all men born under original sin, we do find this—"This holy synod, however, declares that it is not its intention to comprehend in this decree, where original sin is treated of, the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God; but that the constitutions of Pope Sixtus IV., of blessed memory, which it renews, are to be observed, under the penalties contained in those constitutions." And this is all that the Council of Trent has said upon the subject.

That Dr. Croly should represent this as a decree that "the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, is exempt from all sin, actual and original," is certainly most unlikely, although, if he did, it would be nothing to us.

But since the *Tablet* newspaper has actually endeavoured to put this construction on that decree, we ought, perhaps, to show the absurdity of such an attempt.

In the leading article in the *Tablet*, of December 23 (the same article we have quoted in another paper), we find this passage—"After propounding its definition, affirming against the heretics the dogma of the universal transmission of original sin, the Council took care to add, with great delicacy and tenderness for her own children; but in such a way as to leave no doubt about its own sentiments and the strong bias of its mind, 'that it is not its intention to comprehend in its decree the immaculate Virgin Mary, Mother of God,' &c. Our Catholic readers will, no doubt, be struck, as we have been, with the evidence of this concordance of the Church with herself." Now, this confesses that the Council of Trent, out of delicacy and tenderness to those who denied the immaculate conception, carefully refrained from saying that it was true; but it also tries to insinuate that the terms of the decree prove that the Council really believed the doctrine, though they shrunk from saying so, because so many denied it. And the *Tablet* prints the word in italics, thus, "*Immaculate Virgin*," as if that word applied to her, implies her immaculate conception. We notice this, because it is, perhaps, the course intended to be adopted in this controversy. Such writers will, perhaps, produce passages in which the Virgin is called "*immaculate*," and try and impose that as proof that those who called her so, must have believed in the immaculate conception; but truth compels us to say, that such a use of the words is a deliberate deception. In fact, the term "*immaculate Virgin*," only implies that she always continued a virgin; and is so used by Pope Sixtus IV., in his decree of 1476—"Et immaculata Virgo nihilominus

post partum remaneret." And very many who applied the word immaculate to her in a larger sense, intended thereby only that she was preserved from actual sin, and not at all from original sin.

Thus the Dominican monks, who held that the doctrine of the immaculate conception was downright heresy, still called the Virgin "*immaculate*," because they conceived that she had been kept from *actual sin*. So the word immaculate, applied to the Virgin, does not at all prove that they who called the Virgin so, did believe in the immaculate conception, unless the *Tablet* is prepared to say that the order of St. Dominick held the immaculate conception—which even the *Tablet* will not attempt to say.

And with respect to that decree of the Council of Trent, it is to be remembered, that Cardinal Pacheco and other cardinals and bishops in the Council of Trent wanted to introduce words to the effect, that it might be "*piously believed* that the Virgin was conceived without sin;" and the Council positively refused to let those words be put into the decree.—Du Pin, *Eccle. Hist.*, Vol. iii., p. 426. Dublin, 1724. Did that show the strong bias of the Council in favour of the doctrine of the immaculate conception?

And the Council did actually in that very decree renew and confirm the constitutions of Pope Sixtus IV., which actually condemned to excommunication, from which the Pope alone could absolve, "those who should dare to assert that persons who held the contrary doctrine—viz., that the glorious Virgin Mary was conceived in original sin—do incur the crime of heresy or mortal sin; since it is not yet decided by the Roman Church and the Apostolic See." If the Council had really meant to imply that the immaculate conception was an article of the Catholic faith, would they have renewed this sentence of excommunication upon those who should venture to say that it was heresy to deny it?

The plain and evident meaning of the decree of the Council of Trent was this—that in deciding that all mankind were born under original sin, they would not undertake to decide whether the Blessed Virgin was or was not. And until now, Roman Catholics themselves admitted this; for which we appeal to no less a controversialist than Bishop Milner—"The Church does not decide the controversy concerning the conception of the Blessed Virgin, and several other disputed points, because she sees nothing absolutely clear and certain concerning them, either in the written or unwritten word; and, therefore, leaves her children to form their own opinions concerning them."—End of Controversy, Letter 12.

CHRISTIAN MINISTERS NOT SACRIFICING PRIESTS.

We have received a letter, signed "Imus," in reference to the article in our last number, of which the above is the title. As we do not think the writer's objections proceed from a real difference of opinion with us, but from a misapprehension of our meaning, in the crowded state of our columns we hope he will be satisfied if, instead of inserting his letter, we add to our article such explanations as it would seem to require. Its object was to prove that the Christian minister is not a SACRIFICING priest, as were the Pagan *iepeus* or *Sacerdos* and the Jewish *Cohen*, and as the Romish priest claims to be. It was never said or meant that the English language and the English Church do not attach a definite meaning to the term priest; nor was such an absurdity ever thought of, as that the formularies of the Church of England do not clearly recognise a distinction between the ecclesiastical orders of priest and deacon, and assign corresponding offices to each in her ritual. The very title of the article in question expressly limited the sense in which it treated of a priest—viz., a "*sacrificing priest*." In this sense we repeat most emphatically our assertion, that the New Testament knows nothing of the word as applied to Christian ministers—nay, more, that such a sense of the word is utterly irreconcilable with the whole spirit and genius of the Christian religion. Our objection was not to the use of the English word "priest," which has in its etymology and original no connection whatsoever with the *iepeus* of the Greeks, or the *sacerdos* of the Latins, but is the true representative of the Greek *πρεσβυτερος*, Latin *presbyter*, from which word it is contracted—the intermediate step being supplied by the Saxon *preostre*, which, of itself, is sufficient to show that the Romish and Romanising sense of the term is not its genuine sense.

We beg, also, to repeat, that the "*proper functions*" of the Jewish *cohen* (or priest) *as such*, were to offer sacrifice and to intercede for the people; and that the business of teaching, admonishing, governing, and administering discipline, was not *peculiar* to him in his sacerdotal character, but was shared by the Levites and the Elders of the congregation—even by those who did not belong to the sacred tribe. The very passages referred to in our correspondent's letter prove this position

most completely. Thus, from 2 Chron. xvii. 7-9, xxx. 21, 22, xxxv. 3; Ezra iii. 10, 11; Neh. viii. 9, xii. 27, it appears that it was not in their character of *sacrificing* priests that the priests taught the people, because the Levites are associated with them in that office; whilst from the first of the passages just quoted it further appears that even civilians (princes) might be commissioned to take part in the same work. Again, with respect to Deut. xxxi. 9-12, our correspondent has omitted to notice the important word "*thou*"—v. 11. The following extract from the note of Bishop Patrick (who has never been charged with low views respecting the Christian priesthood) will explain our meaning:—"This order being directed, not to all Israel, but to a particular person, plainly imports that the supreme governor, whosoever he was, had the charge laid upon him to take care these laws should be read at the solemn time, that all the people might hear them; and, therefore, I think, *the Jews rightly say that their kings*, when they had them, were bound not only to look after this matter, but to read the law themselves to as many as could hear them—appointing the priests and Levites to read it in as many other assemblies of the people as were necessary for the fulfilling of the precept." Indeed the best commentary upon the passage is furnished by the sacred history itself, from which we learn that Joshua "read all the words of the law, before all the congregation of Israel"—Joshua viii. 34, 35; and that King Josiah "read in the ears of all the men of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, all the words of the book of the covenant"—2 Kings xxiii. 2. The matter is equally clear in the case of another passage insisted on by "Imus."—Deut. xvii. 8-13. On this passage Bishop Patrick observes—"the Jews all agree that the supreme court, or sanhedrin, here spoken of, did not consist only of priests and Levites, but of any persons of the other tribes, who were fit to be promoted to the dignity. Nay, they say if there was not one priest or Levite in the court, it was a lawful judicature; for the high priest himself, no more than any one else, had a place here, merely for his birth, unless his learning in the Law was answerable."

It is needless to go through the other passages adduced by "Imus"—e.g. Lev. x. 8-11—in which the Jewish priests are spoken of as teaching, &c. The same remark applies to them all—viz., that while the priests were, of course, competent to discharge these duties, and were commanded to do so, still it was not *quoad* priests that this was enjoined on them, seeing that others, not invested with the sacerdotal office, might and did discharge them, and were commanded by God to do so. So much for our assertion, at which "Imus" has taken offence, that "under a sacerdotal system, the teacher necessarily occupies, as compared with the priest, a subordinate place; and that under the Jewish Law, teaching was no part of the proper priestly functions, as we may conclude from the fact that no [specific] directions on that head are found in the portions of the Pentateuch which treat of the peculiar duties of the priests [as such]." Again, as to the objection urged against our assertion that "the peculiar business of the Scribes was to expound the law, and that these Scribes belonged indiscriminately to all the tribes, and not exclusively to that of Levi," we are sure that if "Imus" carefully reads over the New Testament, to say nothing of the works of Lightfoot, Vitringa, and others who have treated of the Jewish ecclesiastical polity in the Gospel age, he will no longer call in question so incontrovertible a statement; and we are also sure, that as soon as he makes himself fully acquainted with the respective positions occupied by the Temple and the Synagogue in the time of our Lord, he will cease to doubt the perfect correctness of the assertion, that "to offer sacrifice and intercede were the proper functions of the priest (the minister of the Temple); to teach, to admonish, to govern, to administer discipline, were the special and characteristic duties of the presbyters or elders (the ministers of the Synagogue)."

In conclusion, we beg once more to remind our correspondent that he has mistaken the sense in which we used the word priest. We did not use it, as he seems to think, in its ordinary modern sense of "one who officiates in sacred offices." In this sense, we cordially agree with him, the Christian minister is a priest. We used the term in the sense of a *sacrificing* priest, and our whole argument was based upon this definition. The difference is enormous, and on it depends essentially much of the controversy between Romanists and Protestants. Neither do we maintain—very far, indeed, are we from it—that the office of teaching, admonishing, correcting, &c., is not a proper part of the Christian minister's functions. The very opposite follows from our argument, and was one of its intended consequences. We denied, and we still deny, that the Christian minister is the successor of the Jewish priest, regarded in his proper character as a *sacrificer*. We never denied, nor do we now, that the Christian minister may be regarded as the successor of the Jewish priest when divested of his sacerdotal and purely legal functions, and viewed merely as "one who officiates in sacred things," as the authorized minister in the Church of the true God. But, under this limitation we held, and do still hold, that the Christian minister corresponds more nearly to the Presbyter of the Jewish Synagogue than to the priest of the Jewish Temple.

* Declarat tamen hæc ipsa sancta synodus, non esse suæ intentionis, comprehendere in hoc decreto, ubi de peccato originali agitur, beatam et immaculatam virginem Mariam, Dei Genitricem; sed observandas esse constitutiones felices recordationis Sixti Papæ IV., sub pontificatus constitutionibus contentis, quas innovat.—Sess. v., sect. 5.

* Simili poene ac censuræ subiectos eos, qui ausi fuerint asserere, contrarium opinionem tenentes, videlicet gloriosam virginem Mariam cum originali peccato fuisse conceptam, hæresis crimen, vel peccatum incurrere mortale; cum nondum sit a Romana Ecclesia et apostolica sede decisa.—Bull. of Pope Sixtus IV., A.D. 1483.